THE PRESIDIO: CRISSY FIELD

San Francisco, California

Contact: Superintendent
Golden Gate National Recreation Area
Building 201, Fort Mason
San Francisco, CA 94123

INTRODUCTION TO THE SITE AS A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE: RECOGNIZING CULTURAL AND NATURAL RESOURCE VALUES

Crissy Field is part of the Presidio of San Francisco, which is a unit of Golden Gate National Recreation Area. The Crissy Field cultural landscape was listed as a national historic landmark in 1962. Because of its historic role as the first Army Air Service coastal defense station on the West Coast, Crissy Field may also qualify as a national historic landmark in its own right. In 1994, when the Presidio's general management plan amendment was published, buildings at Crissy Field included the Spanish Revival airfield structures now used for maintenance of the Presidio, a cluster of World War II temporary barracks, and an 1890 lifesaving station.

Crissy Field's important natural features include the most intact and diverse foredune community in San Francisco, rare serpentine plants, and waterbird and shorebird habitat. The Golden Gate promenade, which extends along the length of the shoreline, is heavily used by runners, walkers, bicyclists, and people walking their dogs. The offshore waters provide a world-class sailboarding area. Views from the promenade are spectacular, taking in the bay, the Golden Gate Bridge, and Alcatraz Island.

BACKGROUND

Crissy Field is a narrow strip of land east of the Golden Gate Bridge where the Presidio meets San Francisco Bay. Two hundred years ago, Crissy Field consisted of tidal marsh and natural dunes. The U.S. Army began filling in the marsh in the 1870s, and, in 1921, built an Army Air Service coastal defense station. Over time, as aviation advanced and airplanes needed longer runways to take off and land, the airfield grew. It continued to be used for training and defense through the 1970s, but essentially became obsolete in 1938 when the Golden Gate Bridge was built.

Today, the Presidio is public land, owned by the United States government. The National Park Service manages 20 percent of the property, including Crissy Field, as part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and the Presidio Trust manages the remaining 80 percent. Because the Presidio, including Crissy Field, is set in a densely populated urban area, the surrounding community as well as local environmental organizations and the

nonprofit Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy (GGNPC) all have a strong interest in its management.

A rehabilitation and restoration project was recently completed on Crissy Field in response to recommendations made in the Presidio's 1994 general management plan amendment (GMPA). This was a privately funded project undertaken by the GGNPC in partnership with the National Park Service. The project, from planning through schematic design to implementation, took more than five years to complete.

THE ISSUES

At the time of the GMPA, a portion of Crissy Field was used as an Army maintenance facility and much of the land was covered with asphalt or hardpack. The GMPA's recommendations were to accommodate recreational users, restore the tidal marsh and dunes, and restore the airfield, but the 145-acre parcel was barely large enough to accommodate all of these different uses. This challenge, along with the political nature of planning in San Francisco, made the planning process extremely difficult. The design plan for this small piece of land had to consider cultural, natural, and scenic values while still meeting the public's need for recreational opportunities. There was tension between those who saw the highest value of the land in a recreated marsh providing plant and animal habitat, those who viewed the land strictly as a cultural landscape that should be managed for its significance in aviation history, and those who valued the recreational opportunities for residents in the surrounding urban community. Consideration of these conflicting interests during development of the plan, and implementation of that plan, proved a long and difficult process. Management of the property will continue to pose challenges. The National Park Service and Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy are working to build and maintain relationships with neighboring communities and constituents throughout San Francisco.

METHOD: DEVELOPING A DESIGN FOR CRISSY FIELD

The Planning Process

The National Environmental Policy Act planning process used to develop the Crissy Field design plan included scoping sessions, formation of alternatives, public comment, and release of findings. During the scoping process, several critical issues were identified. Many people thought the entire property should be restored to tidal marsh. This was never a consideration for the National Park Service because restoration of the historic airfield was the only justification for removing several historic buildings on the site. Others thought that the land should be developed into a more conventional recreational park with ballfields. Historians wanted to return the entire property to an airfield and create an airfield museum. The sailboarding community did not want things

to change, as Crissy Field was one of the three or four best sites for windsurfing in the bay. The off-leash dog-walking community also feared change.

Formation of alternatives took several years to complete because there were so many areas of potential controversy but, in the end, the plan was almost unanimously approved. The project director assembled an interdisciplinary planning team made up of designers, resource specialists, public affairs specialists, and others to develop a master plan for the entire site and schematic plans for portions of it. The project director also assembled a team of consultants to provide information and services that were beyond the capability or expertise of the planning team or the GGNPC. During the formal and informal public input process, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area Citizen Advisory Commission provided a forum for discussion.

Design Solutions

The planning team looked for "synchronicities"—places where natural and cultural values could go hand-in-hand. They also considered sustainable design issues and made sure they had the necessary technical information.

Historic Airfield

Because of its unique history, the airfield on its own could likely have qualified as a national historic landmark. It was a cultural resource that needed to be restored in conjunction with the recreation of a tidal marsh. The first problem was the removal and disposal of the earth that the Army had used to fill the marsh. The earth could not be dumped back into San Francisco Bay because of the negative effect on water quality. Instead, it was used to build up one edge of the airfield to improve drainage. Because the earth build-up was only done on the far end of the airfield away from buildings, an optical illusion of sorts was created, making the airfield appear flat when viewed from the buildings.

The remainder of the earth removed from the marsh was used to create earthworks. The planning team chose to stabilize these with native bunch grass rather than the nonnative, highly invasive Bermuda grass that the Army had originally planted. Native bunch grass was chosen because it requires less water and few pesticides, can be clipped back often without killing the plants, and is not invasive. The beach was planted with dune scrub vegetation and stone shingle was removed to improve both recreational and ecological values.

Ohlone Site

During the digging operation to create the marsh restoration, construction crews uncovered a prehistoric site at the point where the marsh enters the bay. It was a 500-year-old Ohlone shell midden, with stone tools for shellfish processing. Working with descendents of the Ohlone, the National Park Service decided to preserve the midden, which required the removal of one acre of land from the wetland. This decision was not

popular with the natural resources staff, but the National Historic Preservation Act did not leave any question about the need for protection once the cultural resource staff had consulted with the tribe. The National Park Service had already begun working with the tribe on the overall project, but dialogue over the prehistoric midden led to the signing of a memorandum of understanding that outlined how the tribe and park would work together. The Ohlone have asked the resource management staff to replant part of the marsh with some of the plant materials traditionally used in cultural activities, and will then be permitted to harvest these through a collection agreement.

Tidal Marsh

As one of the design solutions in the Crissy Field plan, culverts that formerly conducted water directly into San Francisco Bay, thereby reducing water quality, now channel water into the restored marsh, allowing it to act as a natural filter. This is more effective economically and ecologically, and integrates human and natural systems.

In gathering information from experts in various scientific disciplines, the planning team learned that the tidal marsh would need to be a minimum of 30 acres in order to be permanently viable. (A smaller marsh would be filled by sediment over time.) After negotiation, the final restored marsh is approximately 20 acres, and is already beginning to fill. However, planning is currently underway for the Doyle Drive area to the south of Crissy Field, and an expansion of the marsh here is being considered.

Achieving a Way Forward

Developing these solutions was not an easy process. The planning team went through many difficult public meetings and a lot of "horse trading" before agreement was reached on a final design. A great deal of time was spent trying to arrive at consensus in the conflict resolution phase, and the planning was carried out as an iterative process. The project director worked with each special interest group to find its bottom line: what was really important. He also met individually with key representatives of the different groups to identify their interests and then determine critical issues and areas of conflict between groups. As an example, the east beach was the best site for sailboarding but was also the preferred location to place the mouth of the recreated marsh. And placement of a parking lot culvert was in direct conflict with maximizing the size of the recreated marsh. The project director walked together through each area in question with members of all the relevant interest groups, asking them to agree to compromises in each other's presence. Design was also used to resolve many of the conflicts, and in the end the final plan worked well. The project director says that, although the plan looks simple now in its implementation, it was very complicated to develop. The placement of every fence and every culvert took a great deal of negotiation.

Management of Crissy Field continues to be tenuous and negotiations are ongoing. As part of the opening celebration for Crissy Field, a proposal was made to land a biplane. Because the plane would fly over the marsh, natural resource managers were concerned

about habitat disturbance. An agreement was eventually reached by the chiefs of natural and cultural resources: when scheduling events, the two will work together to establish timing to avoid disturbance, and will also negotiate on the size of each event.

A Challenge of Urban Parks

One particular challenge faced by managers of federal lands within an urban setting is that many people do not understand the difference between a municipal park and a national park. If a citywide referendum can be used to make decisions regarding the former, then why not the latter? It was suggested that a referendum in the case of Crissy Field would have resulted in 100 acres of soccer fields and parking lot. When dealing with the public, managers need to let people know that their voice has been heard and what they have said will be taken into consideration, but in making decisions regarding national park lands, the majority does not necessarily rule.

Creating a Constituency Supportive of the Presidio

Working with resource professionals from the National Park Service, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy has developed a stewardship program to promote a sense of public ownership of the Presidio. The GGNPC looks beyond the neighborhoods adjacent to the park, and targets communities of varying ethnic origins and socioeconomic backgrounds that are infrequent park users or participants at park events and functions. The program has created site-specific stewardship projects for "Saturday work-teams." The work often consists of removing invasive exotic vegetation and then replanting a site with native species grown in park nurseries. GGNPC supplies special t-shirts or sweatshirts specific to an individual site, which helps to promote unity among the stewards there.

National Park Service staff identified 74 native plant species to be replanted throughout the site. Americorps workers were hired to collect seeds and take cuttings, and 140,000 individual plants were grown in park nurseries, in large part under the supervision of volunteers. GGNPC reached out to schoolchildren from across the city, and paid for chartered buses to bring them to the park. GGNPC also involved the city's many private corporations, whose workers turned up for a day of physical labor. In the end, the GGNPC ran out of plants before it ran out of volunteers.

Although this approach was expensive, the director of the GGNPC believed it was important in order to foster a feeling of ownership for the Presidio and specifically for Crissy Field among both traditional and nontraditional park users, and to create a community place where all people could come together. Evidence of that support was demonstrated at the opening ceremony for Crissy Field, which was attended by 75,000–85,000 people, many of whom were members of families where English was not the first language. After the crowds left at the end of the day, event organizers were surprised but pleased to see that almost no litter was left behind. This, they believed, indicated a sense of pride as well as ownership of the park.